

A CONFEDERATE MAJOR'S DIARY

The Experience of a Staff Officer in Cox's Brigade of the Army of Northern Virginia

V.
1865.



JANUARY 1.—I enjoyed last night a succession of delightful dreams of home which it is agreeable to recall this morning, because besides the peculiar sweetness that attends their re-introduction in day-light, it is a good thing to commence the new year with happy thoughts. Each member of my beloved household appeared before me in pleasant association and with a distinctness of feature that my waking hours have not dissipated. There are not, however, at any time, moments when those features cannot be summoned before my mind's eye. No, no; they are all too deeply engraved, daguerreotyped upon my heart.

The earth is covered with snow, but the sun shines out brightly and beautifully this new year's morn—typical let us trust of brighter and better days. The mantle of white is perhaps, a fitting vestment for the infant year, emblematic of innocence and purity, for, as yet, it knows not disaster, and crime, and bloodshed—an immunity which its mature progress may not long afford it. Let it, like the new born babe, look pure and fresh as it is in its cradle, with its young eyes just opening to the light of time, for lapse of days will bring as with expanding mortality, both trouble and guilt.

I must endeavor, with the commencement of a new annual chapter, to throw somewhat more cheerfulness into this diary. Or, rather, I must go deeper; I must try to cultivate a spirit of greater resignation under misfortune—must essay to bear my fate with a more serene temper. For what is, or shall be, a diary, but in a certain sense, the reflex of one's inner life and emotions?

With fervent hopes and aspirations for a speedy and favorable change in the present gloomy aspect of our national struggle for deliverance; for the restoration to home and kindred of all who are groaning in the house of imprisonment for the once more brooding presence of dove-like peace over our suffering, agonized land, and, invoking Heaven to preserve for me, safe and bright, the jewels that are gathered in my heart's casket.—**Hail the New Year!**

The services today by Mr. Kinsolvin were peculiarly appropriate. The 50th hymn was impressively sung by our little regular group of worshippers—beginning

"The God of life whose constant care With blessings crowns each opening year,

My scanty span doth still prolong, And wakes anew mine annual song."

January 3.—Heard of the failure of the Porter-Butler expedition against Wilmington, about which I had entertained considerable anxiety. We are all disposed to accept it as an augury that the tide of our adversity is at last turning. Rumors of exchange, also, are very current, but, though invested with some degree of plausibility, I am afraid to place any reliance upon them. The outside pressure in favor of the policy seems to be very strong upon the Yankee Government.

January 4.—More snow. Three additional cases of smallpox reported and moved out of the barracks.

January 6.—Intensely cold. The bay has been frozen over for a few days past, and in consequence we have had no papers—or, rather, no paper, for, as I have heretofore said, that mendacious and sensational sheet, the "Phila. Enquirer," is the only one we are privileged to receive.

Another case of small-pox was carried out today and disinfectants introduced into the Division rooms. I feel but little concern about this disease, some how or other, though the time has been when I should have been greatly alarmed by its proximity. Why is this? Are the painful sense of imprisonment and the wretchedness of the situation such as to blind the eyes and render indifferent the apprehension to other evils? Or do they cause life to assume a less attractive phase and make the desire for it less keen? I can say, from my own experience that the haunting idea of restraint and confinement does sometimes beget a torpidity of hope, a kind of mental atrophy, and an abatement of physical energy, that close in the horizon to such an extent that but few charms are visible, in existence. If, subjected, however, to the crucial test, we would probably find it as precious as tho' all the world were before us for our solace and enjoyment.

January 8.—The sun is out this Sabbath morning—an unusual and unfrequent visitor. Our casual gleams of hope for deliverance hence are

like these fitful glimpses of the solar ray. They cheer when they come out for a moment, but are quickly succeeded by clouds and shadows. The probabilities of exchange, which, some days since, had some semblance of reality about them, seem to have vanished.

January 15.—The past week has rolled by without a single incident of even the most ordinary interest occurring to relieve its monotony. The beads in the rosary of a nun, which she counts and re-counts in her moments of mechanical devotion, are not more alike than the hours and days which succeed each other here. We have had some additional rumors of exchange, but there seems to be no substantial foundation, whatever, for them. We have been favored with better weather, which has been a relief in affording us occasional opportunities for exercise.

The Rev. Mr. Kinsolvin has been released and departed for Richmond. While I am sincerely rejoiced, for his sake, that he is freed from his unjust and causeless restraint, we shall greatly miss his pastoral ministrations, which, I am glad to know, have been productive of great good. Lay services however will be regularly kept up on each Sabbath.

I have consented after much importunity to deliver another lecture before the officers in the barracks on Tuesday evening next. My subject, by way of novelty, will be "Woman and her Influence."

January 16.—Some eighty officers arrived today, mostly from the Army of the West. Also a batch of political prisoners taken in Georgia by Sherman. Nothing could more forcibly portray the inhumanity of the Yankees than the appearance which these latter present. Among the number are some mere boys and a few decrepit and invalid old men,—one of them actually on a wooden stump. What could have possibly been apprehended from such captives? And what but a spirit of wanton cruelty could have prompted their seizure and incarceration?

January 17.—Delivered my lecture to an immense audience. However it may savor of personal vanity, I can but refer to the evident delight and appreciation with which the address was received. The testimonials of pleasure and appreciation were frequent and very marked, and I have great reason to be proud of my success. The Christian Association unanimously tendered me a very enthusiastic vote of thanks.

January 18.—Arch-Bishop Wood, of the Roman Catholic Church from Philadelphia, visited the barracks, and celebrated mass and held other services.

We heard today of the fall of Fort Fisher. The blow is all the more afflicting, as we had been induced, by the first failure, to hope for its safety. The garrison appear to have fought with a desperation and courage worthy of success, with a heroism "above all Greek, all Roman fame." The national prospect certainly looks very gloomy, and the fact adds sorely to the pangs of this most wretched imprisonment. Firmly, believing, however, that it will be positively sinful to distrust our ultimate deliverance from the hands of the impious and rapacious foe, I try to soar above the atmosphere of despondency. The general spirit among the officers, however, is one of great depression.

January 19.—Blessed at last with letters from home, though of very old date, to-wit: Oct. 24th and Nov. 13th. The assurance, however, that my loved ones were then all well and comfortable and their words of affectionate cheer and solace, have greatly relieved and comforted me. I feel fifty pounds lighter. That, perhaps, is not a very desirable physical status, as the fare here is not of a quality to over-tax one into flesh.

January 20.—One of the officers of our Division died last night, of chronic diarrhoea. Several additional cases of small-pox are also reported. When a prisoner dies, his remains are enclosed in a common pine box and ferried over to the Jersey shore, where far away from home and friends, and without the attendant services of a decent Christian funeral, they are committed to a bleak and foreign soil. How harrowing the thought,—especially, realizing, as we do, how frail and precarious here is human existence. Circumstanced as we are, how forcibly impressive the lines of the poet:

"The spider's most attenuated thread Is cord,—is cable,—to man's brittle hold On human life!"

January 22.—A sweet letter (Nov. 14th) from my sister. The heaviest snow of the winter falling. There has hardly been a day for six weeks, that snow has not mantled the earth. Lay services by Lieut. Boyle.

January 23.—A case of small-pox developed in our Division and in the bunk immediately over my head. Rather an uncomfortable proximity. There has been but little mortality from the disease in the hospitals, as the type is either mild or is successfully treated. Most of the convalescents, however, whom I have seen, are considerably disfigured.

January 24.—Thro' the courtesy of Gen. Shoenf, and at the invitation of Gen. Vance, I effected today (Gen. V.) having been offered a room

in the fort and accepted the offer. We have moved out of the filthy noisy barracks, and are now ensconced in our new lodgings. The advantages of the change are greater quiet, privacy, comfort, cleanliness, less rigid surveillance, and, in some respect, better fare; the drawbacks are fewer opportunities of exercise, a stone floor, and inability to communicate freely with our fellow prisoners. The conveniences, however, greatly outweigh the disadvantages. Our mess consists of Gen. Vance, Col. Dick and Capt. Charlton Morgan (brother of the gallant and lamented Gen. Morgan), Maj. T. S. Mills, A. A. G. of Anderson's Division, Capt. Kilgore, A. A. G. of Evitt's (Texas) Brigade, Lieuts. Dickenson, Bristol, Smith, and myself,—a pleasant and congenial coterie. Attached to the room are a water-closet, pump, &c. We have also the benefit of a small cooking-stove upon which to "fix up" our rations, and have access to the sutler of the fort, whose charges are much more reasonable than those of the one in the barracks. We cook, wash plates, (for we have them, now), sweep rooms, make up bunks, &c., by detail, and I flatter myself that I shall soon become an accomplished domestic.

January 26.—I continue to like our new quarters more and more. The privacy and facilities for cleanliness (to say nothing of the exemption from contagion in the barracks), are, of themselves, incalculable luxuries. We have family worship, accompanied by singing, each evening. Gen. Vance generally leading the services, though I, also, occasionally read the form of evening devotion in the Prayer-Book.

January 28.—Several dear letters from home today—one of them of as comparatively recent a date as Dec. 11th—which have greatly cheered me. What an inestimable consolation to know that my loved ones, under God's Providence, are all well and comfortable! From other sources, also, within a day or two past, I have had some very pleasant letters, full of words of generous sympathy and comfort. They bring forcibly to my mind a beautiful episode in Scott's novel of the "Antiquary." It is when old "Edie Ochiltree," the gaberlunzie, detects some flower growing upon the ruined walls of St. Ruth, which was said to smell sweetest by night-time, and he observes, with genuine pathos, that they be like "many folks' guid gifts, that seem mair gracious in adversity; or maybe, it's a parable to teach us not to slight them that are in darkness and trouble, since God sends odours to refresh the mirkiest hour and flowers and pleasant bushes to clothe the ruined buildings!"

January 30.—Anniversary of my wedding day. My memory has been busy in pleasing retrospection. I am not sure but that this absence, painful though it be, has enhanced my appreciation of the blessing which this day, fifteen years ago, conferred upon me. More than ever can I re-echo the sentiment of Brutus, addressed to the daughter of Cato, his faithful Portia:

"Thou art my true and honorable wife, As dear to me as are the ruddy drops That visit this sad heart."

January 31.—Indulged with a walk over the island,—an agreeable episode and very necessary exercise. It is a serious drawback to our otherwise comparatively comfortable situation that we are so closely confined,—this being the first outdoor exercise we have had for a week.

Mrs. Shoenf, the wife of the Commandant, with a graceful and true womanly sympathy, (by the way, she is a Southern lady by birth and education) sent us in a basket of delicacies which were highly relished. I take this occasion to say that the General, himself, is so far as my experience extends, a courteous and humane gentleman. The indignities and inhumanities to which we have been so often subjected, are perpetrated by subordinates, and are, I am satisfied, generally committed without his privity. It must be borne in mind that he is not a native Yankee.

February 3.—We are all considerably exercised upon the subject of the Peace Commission from our Government, which is, at present, within the Federal lines. I feel confident that, desirable as peace is, in every respect, our government will make no unworthy concessions. Peace upon any other basis than the recognition of our nationality and independence will be a stigma which no lapse of generations can erase. It will degrade us as a people, convert us into vassals, and brand with obloquy and ignominy the memories of the patriots who have already fallen in this great struggle.

February 5.—This day one long and eventful year ago, I left home, after a short furlough. I have not seen my wife and children since!

February 7.—A corporal of the Guard attends us daily now in a short walk about the island—a grand luxury and a very courteous privilege. A deep snow has fallen today. Indeed, there has been no time since winter fairly set in, that the ground has been free from its presence.

As I anticipated the Peace Conference has eventuated in nothing. The exacting propositions of the Yankee autocrat are unequalled in effrontery. It is now to be hoped that our people, fully appreciating what they have to expect from our oppressors, will bend their united and enthusiastic energies to a rigorous and unrelenting prosecution of the struggle. We here draw

consolation from the anticipation that the honest effort which has been made by the President to negotiate peace, and its failure, will silence the clamor of croakers and mal-contented while the appointment of Gen. Lee as the Commander in Chief of our Armies, and the resignation of Gen. Breckenridge as Secretary of War, give augury of a successful and brilliant administration of our military affairs.

February 8.—Light! Light is breaking! It is positively announced that a general exchange of prisoners is to be inaugurated at once. Gen. Shoenf, indeed, called in to announce this morning that an instalment would shortly,—probably in the course of the next ten days,—be sent off, and promised that I should go upon the first boat. This is a privilege to which I am not entitled, as my date of my capture is subsequent to that of thousands of others. But the General, has when he could, been uniformly kind to me. Perhaps, I am, in some measure, indirectly indebted for this to the visit of Gen. Ramsay.

Received today a number of very pleasant letters. Every one seems to think me very fortunate, (as, with grateful emotions, I confess that I am), in the number and kindness of my friends. I shall always wear the recollection of them very near to my heart.

February 9.—Gen. Vance left for New York today, en parole, to assist Gen. Beale in the purchase and distribution of clothing, &c., for our prisoners throughout the North, under an agreement recently entered into between the two governments. As it is possible that he may not return before my anticipated departure, this is a proper place to express my sincere regard for him as a man and as a friend. Of uniformly cheerful temperament and kindness of nature, intelligent, genial, courteous, and, in the truest acceptance of the term, a Christian gentleman I have enjoyed, as much as one could enjoy anything under our peculiar surroundings, the association with him, and prize his friendship as a cherished privilege.

Several days since, (I have omitted to mention the fact at the time), one of our pleasant little coterie, Lieut. Bristol, left the mess for the hospital, though we did not, at the time, apprehend that he was seriously indisposed. Tonight we learn that he has died, and of small-pox!

So the contagion has followed us here. I feel profoundly grieved at this melancholy event. To think that, upon the eve of probable exchange, after having lingered in captivity for more than a year, away from home and kindred, he should be forever summoned hence! The occurrence has made a sad gap in our little social brotherhood,—cemented together, as it has been, by a common misfortune and congenial sympathies.

February 11.—I feel light enough to walk on air this morning, despite the recent affliction we have sustained in the death of our comrade. In the first place, there is the hope of speedy exchange; and, then, I am just in receipt of a dear, comforting letter from home, of as recent date as January 29th.

February 12.—Another very severe snow-storm prevailing. We are very apprehensive that its effect will be to obstruct navigation and thus defer our confidently expected and eagerly longed-for release. No unforeseen obstacle intervening, we are assured that we will leave by the close of the present week.

February 19.—The past week has been characterized by no incident of greater importance than the departure of one of our mess,—Capt. Charlton Morgan,—on special exchange. We have been in constant expectation of getting off,—each day, however, so far, bringing but fresh experience of "hope deferred." The river being now free from obstruction, under the favorable influence of several days of fine weather, we may confidently anticipate a speedy exit. The prospect has so excited and unsettled me, that I have been unable to write, and resort to any of our usual "amusements" of diversion.

The march of Sherman through Carolina has caused us great anxiety and trouble. Surely, some dispositions have been, or will be, made to check his advance. Otherwise the most calamitous results must ensue. The probability is that, unless speedily arrested in his career, South Carolina will be the next to suffer his operations and ravages.

Our entire mess have been vaccinated, but as so considerable an interval has elapsed since the first case of small-pox of our friends here, we may reasonably congratulate ourselves upon having escaped contagion.

February 25.—The past week has been altogether the most tedious and wearisome one I have experienced. We have been kept in a constant state of suspense relative to our departure. On Monday we were paroled and assured that we would leave on Thursday. On that day the transport arrived, but was compelled to go to the Castle for coal, since which time, though we have been hourly expecting its return, it has, owing to some difficulty in the way, been engaged in the same work. The state of the prospects most unendurable. There is a present prospect (though the disfigured and maimed have been so previously numerous that I shall try not to dwell upon it), that we shall get off on Monday,—which will be just five days hence.

(Continued on Page Black.)